Chhatrapati Sambhaji

There has been no other character in Maratha history that has been so enigmatic and controversial as Sambhajiraje Bhosale.
Sambhaji or Shambhu raje as he was fondly called , was the eldest son of the legendary Shivaji Maharaj. He was born on 14th May 1647 at Fort Purander. Curiously Sambhajiraje has as many loyalists as he has his share of critics. Some dismiss him as hedonistic , reckless , and cruel , whereas some revere him as the bravest Maratha king that ever lived. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between these two conflicting versions.
Sambhajis reign was short and very tumultous to say the least. His life was abrupt and death so very tragic. But Sambhaji, with his death achieved much more than what he did during his lifetime. He is still deified as the true hindu martyr, that preferred death, to the ignoble life of subservience.

Early Life

Sambhajis mother was Saibai from the family of Nimbalkars of Phaltan. She died early (5th September 1659, at fort Rajgad) after a brief illness , leaving young Sambhaji in the care of his grandmother Jijabai. Shivaji being away on expeditions, young Sambhaji was reared by his grandmother and his stepmothers.
Young Sambhaji was married to minor Jivubai, renamed , Yesubai, daughter of Pilajirao Shirke. It was a matrimonial alliance. Pilajirao was an powerful Deshmukh (Konkan area) in the court of Bijapur . After marriage , he provided Shivaji access to Konkan belt. Incidently Shivajis second wife Soyrabai (mother of Rajaram) was also from the house of the Shirkes.
Sambhaji had to face the cruelties of politics at a very young age. When Mirza Raje Jaisingh cornered Shivaji, forcing on him a humiliating treaty, a part of the agreement was that young Sambhaji was to be kept as a collateral against Shivajis satisfactory adherance to the agreement. Sambhaji was also to serve as a courtier in the mughal base of Aurangabad.
Sambhaji had been a part of Shivajis entourage to Agra and his subsequent confinement there. When Shivaji escaped from Agra, Sambhaji was left behind in the care of some friendly brahmins at Agra. Sambhaji was sent back to Maharashtra much later, once the danger to his life had elapsed.

Sambhaji : The Poet

Sambhaji was also known for being a patron of arts. He employed a learned man called Keshav Pandit Adhyaksh, to read with him Valmiki's celebrated epic, the Ramayan. As a reward, he gave Keshav (1684 A. d.) sixteen hundred small silvercoins known as ladis. The king was moreover no mean versifier. He is known to have written two books of Hindi
poetry, The first was called Nakhshikh, in which he described the pleasures of love. The second was named Nayakabhad. In it he sang the varying charms of the beauties who beguiled his leisure moments.(ref. Kincaid)

The Battle of Succession

A couple of years prior to and after Sambhajis commencement of reign have always been a matter of conjecture innuendos and debate. But one needs to go through all accounts before reaching any conclusion.

It is alleged that Sambhaji always had a troubled relationship with his stepmother Soyrabai. It is said that she (allegedly) harboured ambitions for her son Rajaram. She wanted Rajaram to succeed Shivaji, as the next Maratha king and she started poisoning Shivajis mind to that effect.

Note: Interestingly in a few letters (e.g one to Kudalkar shastri) uncovered, Sambhaji has mentioned a good word (pure as a crystal) for his stepmother. This makes the allegations of Sambhajis alleged troubled relations with his stepmother, all the more baffling for the historians.

According to historians like KhafiKhan, Mannucci, Duff, Kincaid and Sarkar (most of whom have based their versions on the bakhars,viz. Sabhasad, Sivadigvijaya, and Chitnis Bakhars), Sambhaji didnt help his cause either. As alleged by the bakhars, rumours of Sambhajis indulgences of youth were reaching Shivajis ears. There were even reports of Sambhajis misdemeanor towards one Hansa, the daughter of a minister (Annaji Datto Surnis ref. historian Setu Madhavrao Pagdi. Annaji Dattos daughter had apparently commited suicide). Shivaji had always maintained high standards regarding the behavior of his men towards women. Obviously he didn’t take kindly to this news about the crown prince.
To make matters worse, Sambhaji didn’t get along with many of Shivajis ministers and clerks (sarkarkuns).There were reports of Sambhaji interference in the tax collection efforts of these officials and efforts by both parties to show each other in poor light. It is said that Sambhaji on more than one instance sided with the ryot (common subjects) and often publicly ridiculed the ministers whom he accused of high handedness and corruption.
But many historians (Bendre, Shevde, novelists Shivaji Sawant and Vishwas Patil who have researched extensively on Sambhaji) have refuted these allegations that cast aspersions on Sambhajis character. They have laid the blame for Sambhajis actions squarely on a clique of ministers who resented Sambhaji and wanted a more pliant Rajaram to replace Sambhaji as the crown prince. According to these historians, there was calumny spread specifically to malign

Sambhaji.
Shivaji on one occasion did detain the crown prince in the Parnala fort at Parli. But what transpired afterwards has definitely left doubts about Sambhaji's judgement at least in those troubled years.
Sambhaji and his wife Yesubai (this is again disputed as Durgabai, another of Sambhajis wives was said to have accompanied him) apparently took off in the night and joined the Mughal forces of Diler Khan . This took place sometime in 1678. But within a years time, the crown prince realised the folly of his actions when he witnessed the atrocities of the mughals on the ryot (especially the massacare of the marathas by Diler Khans army in fort Bhupatgad, which was surrendered without a fight by its killedar Firangoji Narsala as his prince Sambhaji himself was in the forefront of the mughal army. It is said that Ch.Shivaji awarded Narsala the death sentence for this meek submission of the fort) and escaped back to the Maratha camp at fort Panhala(1680). Sambhaji apparently reconciled with his father, but was still kept under surveillance at the fort.
Rajaram was to be married in the same year. Perhaps, because of Sambhajis disharmony with Soyrabai, Sambhaji was not invited to the wedding of his brother (Rajaram with Janakibai, the daughter of Prataprao Gujar, the late sarsenapati).
Then Shivajis untimely death (3rd April 1680) took place in fort Raigad . This was followed by a lot of palace intrigues. Many of Shivajis ministers like Annaji Datto,Pralhad Niraji,Balaji Avaji Chitnis, Moropant Pingale,Hiroji Farzand etc colluded with Soyrabai and installed a ten year old Rajaram as the next king. Balaji Avaji even dispatched a letter addressed to the killedar(fort in charge) of Panhala to imprison Sambhaji with immediate effect. Janardhan Pant Hanumante was asked to take the custody of Sambhaji. But the message was discovered by some of Sambhajis well wishers, who promptly informed the prince of the conspiracy being hatched against his person. Sambhaji and his men immediately took charge of the fort. The killedar was executed. Two hundred of the conspirators were arrested and put to death. Notable amongst the conspirators were Khandoji Naik the messenger,Bahirji Ingle ,Somaji Banki,Suryaji Kank and Hiroji Farzand (Hiroji had managed to give the slip ,but was rearrested at Chiplun).Janardhan Hanumante was seized in Kolhapur.
Sambhaji then secured the support of some leading Maratha nobles like Hambirao Mohite (the Sarsenapati/commander in chief of the Maratha army, who was also incidently Soyrabais brother and also the father in law of Rajaram viz. father of Rajarams wife Tarabai. Nevertheless, he sided with Sambhaji, whom he considered the rightful heir to the throne by primogeniture).
Sambhaji marched along with twenty thousand troops to fort Raigad. Yesaji Kank, an old Shivaji loyalist opened the fort gates for the prince. Raigad fell without much resistance to Sambhaji. Even the killedar Kanhoji Bhadwalkar switched sides to Sambhaji.
Soyrabai was (allegedly) imprisoned by Sambhaji on charges of plotting against him and also poisoning the late king .Both she and her son Rajaram were imprisoned. Soyrabai died within a week, put to death on Sambhajis orders, as alleged by a section of historians like Kincaid-Parasnis,Sarkar etc based on the text ' Sivadigvijaya' and some European records (but recently some historians have put forward evidences that Soyrabai infact lived a year or two after Shivajis death).

Note: Historians siding Sambhaji also raise a very valid point. If Sambhaji had indeed executed his own step mother

then why would her brother (Hambirrao Mohite) support the cause of Sambhaji? Hambirraos daughter Tarabai was later married to Ch.Rajaram (younger son of Ch Shivaji from Soyrabai.

In February 1681, Sambhaji declared himself the new Chatrapati (king) of the Maratha throne. The king wanted Ramdas Swami, the aged spiritual guide of Shivaji to be himself present at the coronation ceremony. But the old man politely declined citing health reasons , and sent his emissaries instead. As some historians allege, Ramdas was very much perturbed by the bloodshed that took place, prior to the coronation, hence declined his personal presence. But the teacher didn't fail to give Sambhaji a personal letter along with his blessings. In the letter Ramdas swami advised the young king to follow in the footsteps of his great father. Be more tolerant towards his people, avoid decisions in anger and haste and he advised Sambhaji to be more discreet and prudent in the future.

In consonance to the saints advice, Sambhaji decided to let bygones be bygones. He released several of the conspirators. He even reappointed Moropant Pingale as his Peshwa (the loyal Hambirao Mohite already being the commander in chief of the forces).

Then it so happened, that Prince Akbar (son of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb) who had rebelled against his father sought refuge with Sambhaji, something which was readily accepted (Netaji Palkar the veteran ex senapati was sent to receive the prince, considering his experience in the north).

The discredited ministers once again decided to take their chances by enlisting the help of the mughal prince in overthrowing Sambhaji. They tried to induce Akbar, over to their side, and even plotted to poison Sambhaji.

But the prince Akbar, grateful for the protection he had received from the maratha king, informed Sambhaji about the attempt to be made on his life. On hearing the news, Sambhaji's fury was let loose once again.He arrested the conspirators (Annaji Datto, Hiroji Farzand,Balaji Avji etc) and had them trampled under the feet of an elephant.

Note: Balaji Avjis son Khando Ballals name figures in the material written about Sambhaji, which probably indicates that Khando Ballal was pardoned on advice from Sambhajis wife Yesubai and he once again resumed Sambhajis service. Khando Ballal was even said to have saved Sambhajis life in a Goa expedtion. Khando Ballal also accompanied Rajaram during his hazardous journey to Gingee and remained his close aide in those years. Khando Ballal also served Tarabai and later Shahu and was responsible in saving Pant Pratinidhi from Shahus wrath, when Pant Pratinidhi acting in favour of Tarabai went against the interests of Shahu. Khando ballals son Govind Chitnis served Ramrajas cause and helped Balaji Bajirao in installing Ramraja on the maratha throne. It was Govinds son Malhar Chitnis who later wrote the Chitnis bakhar a treatise on Maratha history (including the events related to Sambhaji). His son Balwantrao served Ch. Pratapsinh at Satara.

But this incident, sowed the seeds of permanent distrust in Sambhajis mind, towards many of his men. This also led to the prominence of a Brahmin from Kannauj , by the name of Kavi Kalash (Kalash the poet).Kalash soon became Sambhajis closest confidante and adviser.

As per some historians and bakharkars, Kalash (allegedly) took advantage of Sambhajis distrust towards his other ministers and widened the rift between them. Kavi Kalash was to be a hated figure amongst a section of Marathas and is often called 'Kalusha Kabji' (the evil instigator). Though there are also many historians who swear by Kavi Kalashs intentions and devotion towards Sambhaji, thus making him as much an enigmatic personality as his master.

Campaigns

Sambhajis first campaign was immediately in May 1680. He openly challenged the Mughal Viceroy Khan Jehan alias Bahadur Khan Koka. The Maratha regiments split into three , one attacking the mughal territory of Surat, the other raiding Khandesh and the third taking on the imperial forces at Aurangabad. The attacks proved a success for the Marathas and they came back with a rich booty. Sambhaji and Habirrao Mohite even looted the mughal camp at Burhanpur divesting it of twenty million rupees.

Sambhajis second campaign was a daring attempt to capture the sea fort of Janjira, which unfortunately proved a failure. He even lost a brave officer by the name of Kondaji Farzand. Kondaji had managed to befriend the guarding Siddis (Abyssinians) of Janjira . He had gained their trust by citing his differences with Sambhaji. He thus managed to enter the fort and was about to capture it from within. But unluckily,Kondajis plan was exposed at the last minute and he was arrested and beheaded by the Siddis. A second attempt by another officer Dadaji Raghunath was also foiled, this time by the cruel sea, when the fierce sea waves wrecked his attacking boats. A third attempt was made when Siddi Misri, who was once a part of the Siddi contingent of Janjira switched sides over to the Marathas. Sambhaji made him the commander of his naval fleet. Siddi Misri led the Maratha navy against his fellow Siddis of Janjira. But Siddi Misri lost the naval battle and was himself fatally wounded.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese had aligned themselves with the Mughals. The Portuguese Viceroy Alvor had allowed the Mughals to set up their naval base in Portuguese territory. To punish the viceroy, Sambhaji attacked Portuguese territory (1683-84) , and at one point surrounded Alvor himself. But as fate would have it, Aurangzeb sent a large army to take on the Marathas, forcing Sambhaji to retreat.

Sambhaji then sent a contingent to ravage the mughal territory of Khandesh, and a second contingent to attack the mughul prince Shah Alam in the south (Karnataka region).The Maratha forces met with success and Shah Alams forces had to retreat from several fronts.

Then there was also a campaign against Chikkadevraja the king of Mysore. Chikkadevraja had challenged the Marathas by intruding in their territory. Sambhaji dispatched an army against him, forcing Chikkadevraja to sue for peace.It is said that to counter the barrage of arrows by a huge army of archers from Mysore, Sambhaji had on a ad hoc basis got oil laden rubber armour prepared for his soldiers thus blunting their attack. At the same time he used oil fired arrows to subdue the enemy.

The period from 1684-1686, Aurangzeb concentrated on his southern campaign. Both Bijapur and Golkunda fell in quick succession. Sambhaji may have made a tactical error by not aligning with the combined armies of Bijapur and Golkunda to face the mughal onslaught (But a group of historians lay the blame squarely on the monarchs of Golkunda and Bijapur for the loss of their kingdoms. They maintain the Golkunda king was hedonistic , careless and the Bijapur king was too young and inexperieced to retain their kingdoms). By 1687, the out of service Bijapur troops (mainly the hindus, who felt ignored by the bigoted muslim emperor) joined the Maratha ranks and captured almost hundred and twenty towns which were once a part of the Bijapur provinces.

Meanwhile, Aurangzebs rebel son,prince Akbar (who had sought refuge with the marathas) was feeling the heat of his fathers troops. He therefore took leave of Sambhaji and fled to Persia.

But the emperor Aurangzeb was in no mood to forgive and forget.With the Bijapur and Golkunda kingdoms annexed to the mughal empire, the emperor Aurangzeb decided to concentrate on Sambhaji. He wanted to punish Sambhaji for harbouring his rebel son (and other

rebels like the Rajput Durgadas).
In 1688, Aurangzeb sent Sarja Khan an ex Bijapuri officer to recover the lost Bijapur territory from the marathas.
Sarja khan was led into the jungles of Wai by Sambhajis erstwhile commander in chief , Hambirao Mohite. Though Sarja Khan and his forces were routed by the Marathas, Hambirao Mohite became a casualty of that battle.
The death of his most trusted noble was a big blow for Sambhaji.

Sambhajis character

Till date Sambhaji continues to evoke mixed reactions. Some hail him as a bravest Maratha warrior that ever lived , whereas some critisise him for his indolence and weakness for a good life. But even his critics concede the mans genius. Sambhajis critics like Kincaid-Parasnis mention him spending months in pleasure seeking, only to emerge out of hibernation one fine day, and put up a string of military succeses, wiping out all the blots of procrastination he may be accused of.
Many attribute his split personality to the early plots of his step mother and the ministers against him. This according to these historians made him wary about the people around him. He wasn't able to trust easily. As a result he gathered some wrong people around him, who deliberately led him astray to suit their purposes. He probably spent months under their unsavoury influence,only to be shaken back into reality and good sense by some of Shivajis old loyal aides like Hambirrao Mohite.
But one has to understand that all the historians who have written adversely about Sambhaji either belonged to enemy camps (Mughal, British,Portuguese) or have based their reasons on the Chitnis bakhar, a treatise written 120 years after the death of Sambhaji and that too by a descendent of a man (Balaji Avji Chitnis) who was executed by Sambhaji. Hence one has to be very circumspect before giving complete credence to this bakhar. Even the Sabhadsad bakhar written (4-5 years after Sambhajis death) by Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad, an contemporary of Shivaji, was in his final years (when he wrote the bakhar) an employee of Ch. Rajaram. So its not surprising that he has many a kind word for Rajaram, presents Sambhaji in a negative light. Similarly the Sivadigvijaya bakhar though attributed to Khando Ballal Chitnis , the son of Balaji Avji in fact appears to be written by someone else (probably by someone amongst the Chitnis descendents themselves).
Afterall Sambhaji was raised by the same woman (Jijau ,Shivaji mother and Sambhaji grandmother) who raised the great Shivaji and would have passed on the same values to Sambhaji as were passed on to his father Shivaji.
Also it must be noted that Sambhaji had to face a formidable opponent in the form of the mughal emperor Aurangzeb himself, something which even the great Shivaji was spared of .
The mughal might was several folds greater than that of Bijapur and to Sambhajis credit he gave the mughals a tough fight. He also added several territories to Shivajis existing kingdom like parts of the Portuguese empire in Konkan and Goa, tracts of the Bijapur territory in Karnataka etc. As the acclaimed historian Narhar Kurundar says - if five to six forts were indeed lost to the mughals four to five were also wrested away from this strong enemy.
Another charge levelled on Sambhaji is that he was a alcoholic, addicted to opium, a hedonistic

person, and very careless and irresponsible towards the day to day administration of his kingdom. Assuming that he consumed alcohol, dosent automatically mean that he was negligent in his affairs. Most kings of his time and those prior and after Sambhaji have been addicted to alcohol and opium including his younger brother Rajaram and Mughal emperors like Jehangir . But that neednt translate into irresponsibility either. His brief reign of eight years witnessed several campaigns which wouldnt have been possible without Sambhajis personal attention.

Sambhajis capture and execution

At Kalashs insistence Sambhaji decided to spend the hot summer of 1688 in a palace built by Kavi Kalash at Sangameshwar, a small but climatically cool township, twenty miles north from Vishalgad, and twenty two miles north east from Ratnagiri (this may have proved a mistake on the part of Sambhaji, as for once, he was away from the safe protection of the impregnable fort of Raigad). The news of Sambhajis whereabouts soon reached the mughals. The Mughal commander Muqarrab Khan then devised a daring plan to capture Sambhaji in person. They were helped in their endeavour by the estranged brother in law of Sambhaji, by the name of Ganoji Shirke, who showed the mughal army the way through the adjoining dense forests, simultaneously providing the mughals, logistics and information about Sambhajis movements. In Feb 1688, Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash were surrounded and captured (the maratha commander in chief Mhaloji Ghorpade, the successor to Habirrao Mohite was killed in the skirmish). They were brought before Aurangzeb, who had himself encamped at Akluj (near Pandharpur).

Note: Mughal historians mention Sambhaji being in an inebriated state at the time of his capture and in the midst of courtesans. But recent evidences state that he was accompanied not only by his wife (Yesubai) and ministers (Mhaloji Ghorpade,Dhanaji Jadhav,Santaji Ghorpade) but also by Ranganath Swami, the leading disciple of his spiritual guru Ramdas Swami. Then the question arises whether a person would indulge in such indiscretions in the company of such people? Also as far as accusations about Sambhajis careless behaviour goes, there are letters that record Sambhaji repairing a fallen bastion at Vishalgad just two days before his capture. If Sambhaji was such an irresponsible king then would he have looked into such minute details of his kingdom. So in fair conclusion we can only derive that Sambhaji was betrayed and cleverly captured by the Mughals.

They were both humiliated in public and paraded before the crowds in a buffoons attire. Aurangzeb then offered Sambhaji an insulting proposition. Sambhaji should surrender all his forts and the amassed Maratha treasure to the mughals . Secondly, he should reveal the names of all mughal officers who were secretly colluding with the Marathas, and thirdly Sambhaji should convert himself to Islam and serve the emperor in near future. In return Aurangzeb would spare Sambhajis life.

But the fearless Maratha king scornfully retorted, that he would accept the emperors conditions , only if Aurangzeb agreed to marry off his daughter to him (this is again attributed to the literary imagination of some historians as all of Aurangzebs daughters were quite elderly) . Sambhaji then exchanged insult for insult. This audacity incensed the emperor to no end, and he ordered Sambhajis execution .For three days Sambhaji was tortured at Tulapur, on the banks of river

Bhima , near Pune. Aurangzeb ordered the blasphemous tongue to be pulled out, his eyes were gouged,his limbs severed . Sambhaji was subjected to a very horrific ordeal. But he bore it bravely until ,on the third day, when his head was decapitated.
His aide and confidante Kavi Kalash also remained loyal to his master till the very end. He too met the same fate as Sambhaji.
There is also another story of one mughal officer, Mian Khan, associated with Sambhajis final days. Earlier Sambhaji had given some valuable help to this Mian Khan and the latter was indebted to Sambhaji for this. This same officer was posted at Tulapur during Sambhajis torture. But when asked to gouge out the eyes of Chhatrapati, he had preffered killing himself instead.
Sambhajis disembered remains were later sewn together by some brave people of Vadu (later to be called as Shivle Patils or the Patils who sewed the mortal remains of the king) and finally cremated there with ritual obsequies and honours.
Thus ended the life of a controversial but brave king (11th March 1689) . In death he became a martyr, inspiring a Maratha fightback.
After Sambhajis death, all Maratha nobles forgetting their differences, united under the banner of Chatrapati Rajaram (Sambhajis step brother) and continued their struggle against the Mughals.

Referances: History of the Maratha People by Kincaid, History of the Mahrattas by Duff, Chatrapati Shivaji by Setu M.Pagadi, Shivaji and his Times by J.Sarkar, Translation of Sabhasad/Sivadigvijaya/Chitnis bakhars by Surendranath Sen,Works on Sambhaji by W.S.Bendre, Novels on Sambhaji by Shivaji Sawant and Vishwas Patil.